

From Rhetoricians to Scholars: The *doctorat ès lettres* in the 19th Century

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In France, a long period of slow social devaluation of university titles in the 17th and 18th centuries came to an end with the dissolution of universities by the Convention on September 15, 1793. It was from this (almost) *tabula rasa* that the First French Empire, through the law of May 10, 1806, and the decree of March 17, 1808, re-crystallized a system of higher education around degrees and their awarding. The highest of these grades, the doctorate, is an illuminating vantage point to study the tensions and contradictions of the new teaching system then being set up. As a matter of fact, this degree acquired progressively a specific importance, on the one hand as certifying the ability to produce new knowledge, and on the other as a barrier and level regulating access to the academic body itself. The doctorate thus lies at the interface between the system for producing scientific knowledge and the system for reproducing intellectual elites. Yet to date, historiography has done little to explore the French doctorate, lacking the tools to tackle a documentation both massive and scattered. Drawing on the results of the *ès lettres* project (<https://eslettres.hypotheses.org/>), this paper proposes to study the evolution of expectations toward students in the *facultés des lettres* (humanities): why and how an examination initially focused on rhetorical performance progressively became an ordeal relying mainly on erudition and scholarship?

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